

Irish Life Health of the Nation research reveals people in Ireland are exercising less, socially isolated and more stressed in 2022

- Since Covid-19, the number of people describing themselves as feeling lonely or isolated has almost doubled (increasing from 19% to 34%), with 76% now reporting liking spending time alone, up from 48% in 2019.
- Exercise is decreasing while weight is continuing to increase.
- More than 1 in 4 of under 35s are evidenced as severely distressed, with females more likely to be evidenced as distressed.
- Almost half of respondents (47%) now say the most important aspect of their current role is work life balance - over double the amount (20%) who say salary is most important.

28th June 2022: Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, people in Ireland are exercising less, feel more isolated, are half a stone heavier and are more sedentary during the work day according to Irish Life's Health of the Nation research. The research, completed in May 2022 and based on a nationally representative sample of adults, indicates a need to tackle the effects of post-pandemic exercise inertia and its knock-on impact on the happiness and sociability of adults in Ireland.

When it comes to physical health, the research shows that exercise is decreasing while weight is continuing an upward trend. The number of people who exercise more than 3.5 hours a week has decreased by 7% since 2020. Despite the average height remaining constant, the research findings show that the average weight has increased by half a stone since 2018, which is the equivalent of three pineapples.

In terms of social health, interestingly there's been a really big change with 76% of people now saying they like spending time alone, compared to 48% in 2019. However, there's been an almost doubling of people now feeling lonely or isolated, up to 34% compared to 19% before COVID-19.

The research also found Irish adults are more stressed, depressed and with less hope for the future in comparison to 2020. This includes hope for the future being at an all-time low with over half of people feeling only 'somewhat hopeful', and 4 out of 10 respondents reporting severe or moderate distress. More than 1 in 4 of under 35s are reporting severe distress, while women are more likely to report severe distress than men.

Of those who classified themselves as being severely distressed, 19% indicated that they undertook no exercise, compared to 13% and 14% in the mild and moderate group respectively.

National Health Index

Irish Life's *Health of the Nation* research measures indicators of our nation's health as they fluctuate year on year, providing a comprehensive picture of how physically, socially, and mentally healthy we are as a nation.

The various health indicators are scored out of 1,000 to provide a benchmark health score, named the National Health Index, for that year. Based on the research findings over the past number of years, Irish Life was able to determine that the National Health Index – the Health Score of the nation - has fallen from 549 in 2019 to 537 in 2020 and 528 in 2022.

Commenting on the *Health of the Nation* research, **Stacey Machesney, Head of Health and Wellbeing at Irish Life** said: *"The National Health Index findings tell us that people in Ireland's health score is declining year on year. The index is measured based on questions about your lifestyle, including exercise, diet and mental health, so gives us a picture of overall health.*

The data shows a decrease in the average Health Score which is mainly driven by reduced physical activity. This is consistent with other research that also observed a reduction in physical activity following the measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The reduction in the Health Score that we've seen corresponds to an increased risk of developing chronic health conditions like diabetes or high blood pressure.

Obesity for example is a complex disease with many underlying causes and therefore needs a multifactorial and sensitive response. At a national level, we would support policies that target environmental and commercial factors so that everyone can access a healthy diet. Irish Life Wellbeing works with businesses to develop healthier workplaces with a suite of measurable wellbeing interventions that deliver insights and education around nutrition, exercise, and mental health. At a community level, we encourage and incentivise individuals and groups to engage in healthy lifestyle behaviours. In 2021, Irish Life launched the first MyLife/GAA Healthy Clubs Every Step Counts Challenge, a seven-week walking challenge created for GAA clubs and community members to support their health and wellbeing. The challenge has hit upon a winning formula, engaging community through fun dynamic group challenges and rewards, and transforming lifestyle and health outcomes.”

Professor Niall Moyna, from the School of Health and Human Performance at DCU said: *“The ramifications of the extreme lifestyle shift in 2020 through early 2021 resulting from the pandemic are far-reaching and are likely to have ripple effects for many years to come.*

This research shows us that there has been a persistent upward trend in body weight over the last four years as well as a decline in the amount of exercise that people do per week. If the current trend continues, it is likely that half the Irish adult population will be classified as obese by the end of the current decade. The health implication will be significant considering that obesity is an important risk factor for many chronic diseases.

The changes in our lives since COVID have now seen a greater impact on physical and mental health, with emotional and social challenges having long term consequences of which we’ve only just scratched the surface.”

Work life balance

While social and mental health has wavered following the pandemic, work life balance has become the most important aspect of a role (47%), more than double the next most important aspect, salary, at 20% and job satisfaction third with 14%.

Professor David Collings, Professor of Human Resource Management at DCU said: *“There is little doubt that the increasing prioritisation of work-life balance is a partial explanation for the staffing challenges being faced in hospitality and other sectors where employees are looking for alternatives to the long and anti-social hours which were the norm. Those lucky enough to work from home during the pandemic, also experienced tension in this regard with some research suggesting that working from home meant that the work day extended for many and increasingly impinged on social and family time. The Health of the Nation findings provides some support for those trends. This challenges organisations to think about how they design and allocate work to help employees more effectively balance their work and life.”*

Stacey Machesney added: *“We see how wellbeing is strongly linked to happiness and life satisfaction, and how the priority has shifted to focus on maintaining a work life balance and increasing quality time with friends and family above career development and salary goals. It is important that companies and teams ensure they are investing in what employees care about and that these values are driven throughout the company culture. It is our goal at Irish Life to identify the nation’s current health index and then work to empower people with lifestyle interventions that will help them live healthier lives.”*

Irish Life was also able to determine the nation’s attitude toward workplace wellbeing following two years of remote working. Work life balance is currently the most important aspect of a role, with salary coming in second at 20% and job satisfaction third with 14%. The research also highlighted a range of disparities relating to workplace wellbeing regarding female and male workers. The average number of short breaks taken during the working day was 2.16 for men and 1.67 for women. Men were also more likely to feel expected to check and reply to work emails outside of work hours, with 38% feeling an expectation compared to 27% of women.

Launched in 2019, the MyLife app* has now helped over 150,000 people in Ireland to walk over 16 billion steps and log over 9 million hours of activity.

In addition to its MyLife app, Irish Life has recently developed WorkLife, a new health and wellbeing consultancy aimed to help organisations transform their aspirations for employee wellbeing programmes into a sustainable asset that demonstrates the strategic value of employee wellbeing.

The *Health of the Nation* research has been conducted on an annual basis since 2018, aside from 2021 where restrictions were in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The full *Health of the Nation* research results can be accessed www.irishlife.ie/wellbeing

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For further information, media queries or requests for interviews with Stacey Machesney or an expert from our health panel, please contact:

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Notes to Editor:

Methodology

The Health of the Nation Research was completed in conjunction with Behaviour & Attitudes Research in May 2022, using a nationally representative samples of 1,011 adults in Ireland. Quotas were placed on the number of interviews achieved in each demographic grouping (age, gender, region and social class) to ensure it matched the Irish population. National population norms are in line with the CSO.

The Health of the Nation research was completed in 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2022. Not all areas of interest were examined in each wave of research, which is why there is a mix of 2018, 2019 and 2020 statistics in the comparisons.

About Irish Life:

Irish Life is one of Ireland's leading financial services groups, now taking care of over 1.4 million customers. We help people to confidently prepare for and embrace life's changes with our wide range of health, life, pension and investment solutions.

We are part of the Great-West Lifeco group of companies, one of the world's leading life assurance organisations. Great-West Lifeco and its subsidiaries have over CAD\$2.3 trillion in consolidated assets under administration* and are members of the Power Financial Corporation group of companies.

Irish Life delivers innovative solutions for personal and corporate customers, backed by the highest standards of service. And as part of Great-West Lifeco, we have access to experience and expertise on a global scale, so we can continuously enhance our leading range of services and solutions.

** As at 31 December 2021*

***About MyLife App**

MyLife, created in collaboration with dacadoo, an award winning Swiss-based health engagement platform company, and Loylogic, a worldwide rewards aggregator, MyLife is the first app of its kind in the Irish market. Designed to encourage consumers to embrace healthier lifestyles the aim of MyLife is to motivate and support people to turn good intentions into actions. With the help of a personalised AI Health Coach to engage and keep users motivated, the MyLife app will give consumers a better understanding about their health, so they can easily identify ways to improve it. These improvements are easy to monitor through the MyLife Health Score which indicates overall health and wellbeing. In a world where we are overloaded with health data, the MyLife Health Score is a scientific way to measure individual health in one easy to understand single metric taking into account information relating to the body, mind and lifestyle.